Channelling Change: Evolution in Guernsey
Norman French Phonology

Submitted by Helen Margaret Simmonds to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in French, September 2012.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines evolution in the phonology of Guernesiais, the endangered variety of Norman French indigenous to the Channel Island of Guernsey. It identifies ways in which modern Guernesiais phonology differs from previous descriptions of the variety written between 1870 and 2008, and identifies new patterns of phonological variation which correlate with speaker place of origin within the island. This is accomplished through a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses of a new corpus of speech data. The relationship between the data and other extralinguistic variables such as age and gender is also explored.

The Guernsey 2010 corpus was gathered during linguistic interviews held with forty-nine adult native speakers of Guernesiais between July and September 2010. The interviews featured a word list translation task (English > Guernesiais), a series of socio-biographical questions, and a self-assessment questionnaire which sought to elicit information about the participants’ use of Guernesiais as well as their responses to questions relating to language revitalisation issues. The interviews resulted in over 40 hours of recorded material in addition to a bank of written socio-biographical, behavioural and attitudinal data.

Analysis of the phonetically transcribed data revealed that a number of phonological features of Guernesiais have evolved, perhaps owing to greater contact with English or through other processes of language change such as levelling. Shifting patterns of diatopic variation indicate that south-western Guernesiais forms are spreading northwards, and this is echoed in the findings of the socio-biographical data. New evidence of diatopic variation in final consonant devoicing and word-final post-obstruent liquid deletion was also found.

This thesis concludes that there is still considerable variation in the pronunciation of modern native speakers of Guernesiais, and that this correlates with place of origin within the island. While northern Guernesiais forms have not disappeared entirely, south-western Guernesiais appears set to become the de facto standard for the variety, especially as the political impetus for revitalisation is generated from this area of the island.
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Abbreviations used in examples:

- S.F. Standard French
- M.N. Mainland Norman
- G. Guernesiais
- swG. South-western Guernesiais

Transcription notation: vowel nasalisation

It should be noted from the outset that vowel nasalisation in Guernesiais is weaker than that encountered in standard French (cf. §2.5.6). Vowels in Guernesiais which nonetheless have a definite nasalised character are represented using the conventional tilde diacritic. Non-standard IPA notation has been employed in the transcriptions which follow in order to accurately represent the lesser degrees of vowel nasalisation which also occur in the variety: the tilde diacritic has been displaced to the right (after Coveney 2001) where nasalisation is partial, with parentheses used to indicate cases in which the nasalisation of a vowel is particularly slight.